



**GSA Public Buildings Service**



# Fort Worth: Building a Civic Square

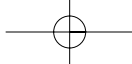
Stories about the revival of neglected urban plazas, parks and open spaces are increasingly common these days. From New York's Bryant Park to Oakland's Lafayette Square, American cities are learning the art and craft of nursing public spaces back to life.

But what city would be audacious enough to create a brand new civic square? Try Fort Worth, Texas, where city planners, civic leaders and businesses are cobbling together a small historic park, several little-used open spaces, a parking lot and vacated streets to create a new central place.

The U.S. General Services Administration, whose Fritz G. Lanham Federal Building faces the would-be square, has enthusiastically embraced the project in hope of creating a more amenable setting for federal workers and visitors to the building. GSA helped provide planning consultants in the early stages of the process, wants to help underwrite an economic impact study for the project, and is planning to recon-

Above: Interim improvements to the plaza adjacent to Fritz G. Lanham Federal Building.  
Courtesy City of Fort Worth Planning Department.

**A Field Report from the  
GSA Center for Urban  
Development**



Left: Aerial view of site

Center: Montage of existing conditions, with the Fritz G. Lanham Federal Building to the left

Photos: City of Fort Worth Planning Department

struct the section of the park that fronts the federal office building.

In fact, GSA's involvement has been a "life-line" during the formative stages of the project, city planner Mike Brennan said. Although the civic square idea has won public support, the city has been slow to commit resources to it, as thorny questions about parking, property acquisition, design and management—and how to pay for it all—remain.

### Conceiving a Civic Square

Building a civic square is no easy task, especially in Fort Worth. The city's torrid summer heat and reliance on cars have contributed to a lack of a strong urban public space tradition; in fact, if you ask a local resident to name the city's best downtown public space, they are likely to mention Sundance Square, an entertainment zone whose main open space is a parking lot (albeit one that occasionally hosts farmers' markets and concerts).

The notion of creating a civic square emerged in summer, 1999, during discussions about a bus transfer station at downtown's southeastern edge. Project for Public Spaces' Fred Kent, consulting with the "T," Fort Worth's transit agency, suggested the city would do better by arraying bus stops along the streets near city hall and the federal building, creating bursts of pedestrian activity as people transferred between lines.

Kent then suggested that the jumble of spaces and streets in the area could be redesigned as a new public space, a "civic square" for bus riders, government workers and convention-goers alike. All the area needed was modest improvements to the

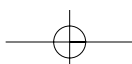
spaces and streets, better connections between the buildings and the spaces they front, and simple programming strategies.

Fort Worth was ready for such a suggestion. City leaders were happily watching the success of Sundance Square, which offered nightly proof that lively pedestrian street life could take hold in Fort Worth. Meanwhile, downtown still had a dearth of open space, and even though the city was shepherding through large civic improvements at the south end of downtown, they somehow seemed to lack a center of gravity. City staff, aware of GSA's desire to work more closely with communities, asked the agency's Center for Urban Development for help.

GSA was ready, too. "There was virtually no hesitation on our part. We didn't know how we'd be involved, but we saw that this was an opportunity to do something that would benefit GSA and Fort Worth, and would be a good match with our First Impressions and urban livability programs," said Harold Hebert, asset manager for GSA's Greater Southwest Region.

The civic square, which is being called Hyde Park, will occupy a seemingly unlikely place. It is located a few blocks from the most active part of downtown, in an area dominated by government and institutional facilities. Two busy streets cross the site, while smaller streets and vacated streets connect in at odd angles. One corner is occupied by the federal building and a city courthouse; another by city hall and the local cathedral; a third by a telephone company building, a motel and a historic, but vacant, office building.

The area seems dormant, but it has some underlying strengths that may allow it to evolve









The Main Street Arts Festival, which is held two blocks east of Hyde Park, is one of downtown's most successful public events.

Courtesy Downtown Fort Worth

Because of these concerns, perhaps, the city's approach to the project has been cautious. In fact, despite the council's endorsement, "this project was on life support at the beginning last year," Brennan said. "People were skeptical about whether it was worth spending time on."

So, while city staff are coordinating the focus group, creating a web page, and identifying resources for site acquisition, the city has offered no funds for planning and design consultants, construction or programming. GSA's support so far—small investments that will encourage others to take actions beneficial to both GSA's business interests and the city at large—have thus been critical to the project's survival in a number of ways:

- GSA's Center for Urban Development has supported PPS's continued involvement in the project, through a general consulting arrangement. PPS staff attend focus group and design review meetings, and helped draft concept and phasing plans for the civic square.

- City leaders would like evidence that public money spent on Hyde Park will have an economic or social return, city planning director Fernando Costa says. GSA hopes to help fund a research report, which will likely focus on case studies of analogous projects. "If we can argue how projects like this have paid for themselves through economic and social benefits, the city council will be much more inclined to finance part of this," says Costa.

- GSA is preparing to redesign and reconstruct the plaza next to the federal building—the first new section of Hyde Park that would be

built. GSA is expected to execute a license agreement with the city, which will allow it to commission a design and pay for improvements, probably through its "First Impressions" program. Design work, by Dallas-based Design Associates International, is under way.

- GSA's commitment to the project, especially the Center for Urban Development's involvement, provided an important political boost, as well. "The more we were able to say GSA was using Fort Worth as a model, the more people started listening," Brennan said.

City staff are moving toward an end-of-the-year deadline for releasing a full-fledged proposal for the park, including a site acquisition plan, a conceptual design, a phasing plan, a strategy for managing and programming the space, and funding for the improvements.

GSA, meanwhile, is preparing for the day when it will assume responsibility for the "Federal Plaza" section of the park. The design calls for a seating area where small ceremonies or performances could occur, water features, space for a food vendor and green areas. Another matter to resolve is who will manage and program the space: GSA's goal is to create the space while identifying a local partner to shoulder the programming responsibility. Ultimately, GSA may contract with a group like Downtown Fort Worth for those services.

GSA has approached the project so far with patience, persistence and a willingness to be creative with its resources. This approach will no doubt help it solve the management-programming issue and other problems that may arise. GSA has occupied the site for some three decades, and is taking a long-term view: "Over the 29 years I've worked here, we've had a steady loss of those amenities that make an area a good place to be—restaurants, retail, clothing stores, banks, movie theatres," said Hebert. "We are keenly aware of what's no longer here, and that's one reason we are happy to work with the city on this process."

This Field Report is produced by the Design History Foundation for the U.S. General Services Administration, Center for Urban Development. For more information, contact:

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